DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 839 IR 018 980

AUTHOR Baker, Ronald L.; Wolff, Susan J.
TITLE Distance Education Consortia: The Northwest Experience.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 6p.; In: Distance Learning '98. Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning (14th, Madison, WI, August 5-7, 1998); see IR 018 976.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Colleges; Computer Networks; *Consortia; Continuing Education; Cooperative Programs; Delivery Systems; *Distance Education; *Educational Development; Educational Planning; Enrollment; *Intercollegiate Cooperation; State Programs; *Technical Institutes; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS Oregon; Washington

ABSTRACT

While most community and technical colleges individually offer courses by distance learning, they are increasingly challenged to provide the full range of instructional and student support services needed for expanding distance education programs. To address this issue, Washington and Oregon community and technical colleges formed distance education consortia to leverage individual college investments and faculty expertise to provide unserved and underserved students with low-cost, quality educational opportunities that surmount time and place barriers. This paper provides background information on consortial efforts in Oregon and Washington, including the Oregon Community College Distance Education Consortium (OCCDEC), the Washington Distance Learning Council of the Instruction Commission, and the Northwest Telecommunications Network (NWTN). Tables of 1997-1998 Oregon community colleges distance learning enrollment data and 1996-1997 Washington community and technical colleges distance learning enrollment data are provided. Current initiatives, including adoption of the Strategic Plan of the Oregon Community Colleges for Distance Learning and formation of the Washington Online Consortium (WAOL) are summarized. Other topics include related consortia and sustainability of the consortia. (DLS)

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Distance Education Consortia: The Northwest Experience

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Introduction

Fulfilling community and technical college missions in light of increasing economic, political, and social pressures is a challenge confronting Washington and Oregon community and technical colleges as they transition into the next century. It empowers students by permitting greater access to information, by increasing the variety of learning options, and by granting students greater control over the pace and manner of learning. Distance education is one important way for the Washington and Oregon community and technical colleges to keep the "open door" open and remain relevant, responsive, accessible, and affordable.

While most community and technical colleges individually offer courses by distance education, they are increasingly challenged to provide the full range of instructional and student support services needed for expanding distance education programs. To address that issue, Washington and Oregon community and technical colleges formed distance education consortia to leverage individual college investments and faculty expertise to provide unserved and underserved students with low-cost, quality educational opportunities that surmount time and place barriers. Additionally, these partnerships distribute costs over a broader base to achieve economies of scale to develop distance education policies, implement cooperative distance learning procedures, and deliver community college instructional programs and services that combine the best technology practices with the best teaching and learning practices.

Background

Oregon

Beginning with the formation of the Oregon Community College Telecommunications Consortium (OCCTC) in 1981, the Oregon community colleges recognized the benefits of working together to deliver instruction to time-bound and place-bound students throughout the state (Baker, 1997b). OCCTC's guiding principle was the vision that the consortium would investigate and implement other telecommunications modes for use by persons, organizations, businesses, and agencies in the college districts. OCCTC formed working relationships with Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) and other public television stations in the state. In 1986 the community college presidents placed telecommunications as a priority in their long-range planning and colleges began purchasing satellite dishes. The consortium changed its name in 1995 to the Oregon Community College Distance Education Consortium (OCCDEC) to better align with the broadening scope of the consortium's activities.

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Oregon's community colleges currently provide distance education in a variety of forms that include telecourses, online courses, ED-NET (satellite delivered) courses, correspondence courses, videotaped courses, and two-way interactive video courses. As noted in Table 1, the 17 Oregon community colleges collectively serve thousands of students by distance education.

Table 1. 1997–1998 Oregon Community Colleges Distance Learning Enrollment Data

Distance Learning Mode	Class Sections	Enrollment	FTE
Telecourses	403	12,130	909.4
Online Courses	506	8,097	563.9
Correspondence Courses	16	272	17.4
Videotaped Courses	157	1,034	76.0
Interactive Video Courses	85	1,406	105.3
Ed-Net Courses	2	14	0.9
TOTAL	1,169	22,953	1,672.9

Washington

Distance education consortial efforts in Washington's community and technical colleges parallel those in Oregon. Prior to 1977, college telecourse coordinators met informally to address telecourse distance education issues (Washington State Board for Community College Education, 1990). With the formation of the Telecommunication Center for the Washington Community Colleges, the Video Telecommunications User Group (VTUG) was formed to support the use of telecourses. The VTUG mission quickly expanded to include other forms of distance education and the organization changed its name to the Coordinators of Distance Education (CODE) in 1995 to better reflect its expanded roles and responsibilities. That role was further expanded in 1998 when CODE became the Distance Learning Council of the Instruction Commission.

A regional approach for the delivery of video-based courses was achieved in 1995 with the formation of the Northwest Telecommunications Network (NWTN)—a consortium of 16 community and technology colleges in the Puget Sound corridor (Baker, 1998). NWTN's goal was to work with local governments and commercial cable television systems to create a coordinated, seamless telecourse delivery system across political and institutional boundaries.

Consortial efforts were advanced in 1995 when the Washington State Legislature allocated funding for a statewide Educational Technology Initiative (ETI) to support the use of technology in instruction (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 1996). This initiative was followed with a legislative appropriation for the K–20 Educational Telecommunications Network (K–20) to create a comprehensive statewide technology infrastructure to delivery of distance education to K–12 sites, community and technical colleges, and universities (Washington State Department of Information Services, 1996). As

with the ETI initiative, K–20 funds are limited to technological infrastructure and equipment purchases only. Implementation of the K–20 network enables colleges to use interactive video as a means to collectively offer courses that historically experienced cancellations or low enrollments at individual colleges.

Like the Oregon community colleges, the Washington community and technical colleges provide distance education to thousands of students in an expanding variety of forms (see Table 2). Reflecting the demand for distance education courses, the community and technical colleges conducted an Educational Technology Strategic Planning Process (ETSPP) that recommended the formation of the Internet/Distance Education Consortium of Washington to collectively meet the expanding demand for online classes (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 1996).

Table 2. 1996–1997 Washington Community and Technical Colleges' Distance Learning Enrollment Data (Baker, 1997a)

Distance Education Activity	Class Sections	Enrollment	FTE
Correspondence Courses	1,086	5,311	547
Telecourses	906	18,288	1,943
Audio Teleclasses	41	274	27
Interactive Video Teleclasses	134	881	92
Online Classes	111	1,142	93
Multimedia Conferencing	8	30	3
TOTAL	2,286	25,926	2,705

Current Initiatives

Oregon

In June of 1997 the Oregon community college presidents and the Commissioner of the Office of Community College Services unanimously adopted the Strategic Plan of the Oregon Community Colleges for Distance Learning (Baker, 1997b). This landmark agreement extended the OCCDEC consortium to form a comprehensive framework for statewide cooperation in distance delivery of instructional programs and support services.

The community college distance learning strategic plan, with its unique statewide inter-institutional *Host/Provider* partnership agreement, incorporates and complements the academic and technological investments made by partner colleges. In the *Host/Provider* model, a host college is a college that incorporates a provider-developed courseware as part of, or in support of, the host college's curriculum. Host colleges are responsible for the student services components of a student's learning experience. A provider college is a college that supplies the instructional component of the course. Host colleges and provider

colleges have identifiable roles and responsibilities that are outlined in the distance learning strategic plan. The consortium, too, has a defined role. The consortium is responsible for those elements necessary to support inter-college distance learning activities for all community colleges, both hosts and providers.

Washington

The presidents of Washington's community and technical colleges authorized the formation of the Washington Online Consortium (WAOL) in 1997 (Baker, 1998). This statewide consortium was developed as a mechanism to offer an Associate of Arts (AA) degree entirely online. The presidents committed startup funding for the consortium to develop online student services and to develop 20 online courses. The Student Services Commission and Instruction Commission are each developing policies and procedures to support this effort.

Related Consortia

Consortia are emerging as one of the most powerful ways in which libraries can support distance education. They help individual libraries leverage limited resources to address rapidly changing technologies, changes in the scholarly publishing industry, and increasingly diverse and dispersed student populations. Collectively, library consortia provide services and opportunities for students that go beyond the capacity of individual libraries.

Community and technical colleges in both Washington and Oregon have a history of regional collaboration with public libraries and four-year college/university libraries. In recent years, those efforts have been escalated to building statewide consortia. In some cases, those consortia have crossed state boundaries. Proposed 1999 legislative budget requests have been developed in both states to support these efforts.

Sustainability

Washington and Oregon community and technical college distance education consortia have evolved from grass roots cooperative efforts to more formally structured integrated elements of broader statewide educational strategies. While differences in organization, funding, and governance exist between states, the sustainability of distance education consortia in both states depends upon three primary factors: a) clear and consistent visions for collaboration among institutions, b) institutional and statewide policies and practices that support the implementation of that vision, and c) consistent and assured funding commitments for distance education consortial operations.

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Autobiographical Sketches

Prior to becoming the Director of Distance Education for the Oregon community colleges, **Ron Baker** was a community college faculty member and higher education administrator in Washington State for more than 20 years. He is a lifelong advocate for the use of technologies and innovative methodologies to enhance teaching and learning in higher education. Ron combined his current interests in leadership and distance education in a recent study of systemic distance education issues in Washington State community and technical colleges.

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